

Inbetween by theupside_downer

Category: Stranger Things (TV 2016)

Genre: Coping, Eventual Relationships, Eventual Smut, F/M, Friendship, Gen, Grief, Hurt/Comfort, I hate love triangle tropes btw, Romance, Supernatural - Freeform, meaning i will try my best to avoid them, not steve bashing either

Language: English

Characters: Barbara "Barb" Holland, Dustin Henderson, Eleven (Stranger Things), Jim "Chief" Hopper, Joyce Byers, Lucas Sinclair, Mike Wheeler, Steve Harrington, Will Byers

Relationships: Jonathan Byers/Nancy Wheeler

Status: In-Progress

Published: 2016-08-06

Updated: 2016-08-28

Packaged: 2022-03-31 22:53:39

Rating: Teen And Up Audiences

Warnings: Creator Chose Not To Use Archive Warnings

Chapters: 5

Words: 12,676

Publisher: archiveofourown.org

Summary:

Nancy Wheeler was not the same girl she used to be. In fact, it was evident that from the morning she realized Barb had gone missing to the dreadful moment Eleven had confirmed her worst fear, she had undergone an irreversible change. But it was in that time, the period in between the present and the old, that Nancy had come across someone that made her feel something new.

1. Prologue

January 2nd, 1984

It was already dark out in Hawkins by the time Nancy Wheeler had begrudgingly completed her advanced literature essay on *The Scarlet Letter*. The words, at least the legible ones towards the end of the paper, were sloppy and seemed to have been scrawled in a frenzy that had utterly no regard for lines, margins, or Hawthorne's pretentious writing. She hadn't read the book; and the chapters she had read were jumbled to the point where she couldn't differentiate Pearl from Hester (and whether Roger was having an affair with Dimmesdale or??). Either way, it wasn't like teachers should be expecting the best considering they were hardheaded enough to assign homework over the holidays.

To her benefit, it wasn't like Mr. Caster would grade the paper too harshly considering he was witness to Nancy's longing stares at Barb's empty desk over the past month. Her teachers, especially Caster, were also well aware that she was a good student and an exceptional writer at that. During class however, Nancy wasn't sure if being plagued by the constant feeling of loneliness and guilt was worse than the unabashed looks of pity her teacher gave her when he wasn't too busy taking advantage of his height to glimpse down girls' blouses. Even though she wasn't exactly looking forward to the first day back from winter break, she admitted to herself that spending time in school would mean less time being watched like a hawk by her parents. Not only were they still warming up to her new boyfriend, the recent disappearances called for strict curfews and bedroom checks that put prison security to shame.

While she tapped the metal tip of her pencil lightly against her temple, the setting sun began emphasizing the artificial light that lit her desk, causing her eyes to droop within 20 second intervals. Deciding that it was the inevitable time where she was compelled to turn off the lights, lay down, and block any morbid thought from invading her mind, she slipped into pajamas and tucked herself into

bed. It was in those moments that she longed for when her mother would read to her while holding her hand until she drifted off. Instead, Mrs. Wheeler's affections were now expressed by her constant questions of concern. Whether Nancy was eating enough, if she was keeping her grades up, if she slept well at night. Whenever she even mentioned Steve she could see her mom restraining herself from asking the inevitable question, "Are you using protection or is it already too late to ask?"

Steve. The boy who constantly disappointed yet somehow redeemed himself with apologies and acts of kindness. Like the other day, when he suggested that they take pictures in a photobooth at the mall but sitting in the confined space made Nancy remember entering that same booth with Barb. The same graffiti that read "Call Angie for a good time" and "place ass here" were still scratched haphazardly on the wooden bench inside. While details on whether it had been on Barb's birthday in August or the weekend prior were blurry but it affected her to the point where she couldn't bring herself to smile in any of the pictures despite Steve's attempts to crack jokes and even tickle her ribcage.

When the booth finally produced the set of dreary pictures, he couldn't help but smack his lips and state aloofly, "Well, that was a waste of three dollars." Nancy knew he had been trying to be lighthearted and somehow hoped the emotion would transfer to her, however, the entire ordeal could have been avoided if he hadn't badgered her to go out and "distract herself" for two hours straight in the first place. Not to mention he'd basically dragged her there with the promise that she would have the time of her life even though she'd made it perfectly clear she was perfectly content staying at home. So logically, Nancy gave him a piece of her mind that may have included the tasteful words "mega-douche" and "assface" before calling her mother to give her a ride home.

Like clockwork, there were soft clinks from the pinecones and pebbles hitting her window later that evening. After scoffing to herself a couple of times, she found it within herself to roll out of bed

and slide the window up. As soon as he saw her face, Steve bombarded her with self deprecating apologies and various offers of “making it up to her.” Something about the fact he was an only child made Nancy figure he was used to getting everything he wanted, even if it meant making puppy dog eyes and over exaggerated frowny faces. It was impossible not to smile down at him, accepting the fact that she may have lashed out a little and that he didn't deserve to stand outside shivering in the middle of an Indiana winter for too long. Almost immediately, he'd recognized her conceding smirk and returned a grin before taking it as an invitation to climb up into her bedroom.

As she hid under a mountain of covers, the memory seemed distant and unclear although though it had only been 2 weeks before. Even more daunting however, was that she could still remember Jonathan Byers laying in bed next to her as if it were yesterday. The fact itself made her shiver a little and she tried shoo-ing away the recollection of the faint smell of cinnamon and burnt toast that he'd left behind on her pillow or the way he made sure she'd fallen asleep before even closing his eyes or the soft rhythm of his breathing. As strange as it sounds, that had been the first and only time she'd slept with a boy her age. Of course not in the sexual sort of way, but even in her relationship with Steve, they'd never attempted to stay together the entire night and she couldn't say that she didn't prefer it that way. He had the tendency of hogging blankets.

Eventually, the desire for sleep became overwhelming as her eyelids began to flutter shut despite various thoughts that continued to pop in her head; the last image in her mind being Jonathan's face when he accepted the camera she'd given him only days before.

2. Pancakes and Projects

Notes for the Chapter:

Just letting you guys know, Chapter 1 established a bit of the time frame and worked more as a prologue to the story so this chapter is more representative of what the rest of the fic should be like!

January 3rd, 1984

“Nancy! Your pancakes are getting cold!” Mrs. Wheeler yelled from the bottom of the stairs with an obvious tone of exasperation in her voice. It was already hard enough forcing Mike out of bed every morning in which she usually had to threaten him with losing his “basement privileges.” Nancy’s tardiness was just another addition to an already hectic morning.

Taking note of her mother’s waning patience, she pulled on her favorite burgundy sweater over a polka-dotted collared blouse that was a little more wrinkled than what should be considered acceptable, but she figured no one would notice it under her sweater anyways. Taking a moment to look in the mirror on her desk and pat down some stray hairs, she stared at her reflection.

“Today is going to be a good day because you want it to be.” Nancy stated to herself, hoping the words would somehow change the dreary mood she was in. Another day without Barb.

“Nancy!” Her mother screamed again, prompting her to slam the mirror down and rush down the stairs.

“Coming” she retorted, almost tripping over her own sneakered feet on the way to the kitchen. Mrs. Wheeler was quickly putting together their lunch for the day, paying too much attention to the construction of a PB&J sandwich to notice Nancy’s entrance. Meanwhile, Mike was already sitting at the table, playing with one of his pawns from Dungeons and Dragons. It made her a little sad to remember having played the game with her brother but not being able to recall the name of the character he was holding.

"Mike you've barely touched your pancakes." Their mother told Mike, her eyebrows upturned in a concerned arc. "I can make you waffles instead if you'd like?" She set a plate of pancakes in front of Nancy, not realizing what she had just said. When her question was met with silence and deep frown from Mike, she immediately retracted, "Oh, I'm sorry sweetie. You know what, I'll put a poptart in your bag in case you get hungry before lunch."

Mike shrugged and made a point of pushing his plate away from him before getting up to grab his lunchbag and backpack from the counter. Watching quietly, she observed Mrs. Wheeler give him a peck on the forehead and rub his shoulder in a comforting way that all mothers seem to know how to do. Wordlessly, he returned a soft smile and walked out the front door to bike to his Middle School.

Nancy couldn't help but be proud of him. As irritating and spoiled as she sometimes found him to be, he'd been taking Eleven's loss in stride, displaying a level of maturity she never thought he was capable of. She figured that he probably felt a lot more pain than he showed, but that he kept it to himself for the sake of their mother. After everything that had happened nearly two months ago, their mother couldn't believe everything that had successfully gone over her head. Unfortunately, she didn't know that the proper reaction wasn't to resort to watching her kids a little too closely, but Nancy could tell that it was her own form of compensating. To their benefit, she still chose to allow them some of their space and carefully word her questions in a way that wouldn't somehow motivate them to run away or heaven forbid, get involved in another government conspiracy.

Mrs. Wheeler watched her son ride his bike down the street from the kitchen window before turning to Nancy and sighing, "It took you long enough to get down here kiddo. I was starting to think you hadn't even gotten dressed." Her eyes rested on Nancy's sweater and for a second she thought her mother had somehow acquired x-ray vision and could tell just how unkempt she actually was.

"I like that blouse. When did you get that?" She stated casually, turning her back to face the dirty dishes in the sink.

Nancy nearly sighed in relief before muttering, "Steve got it for me

on Christmas” between nibbles of her pancakes.

“The boy really does have a sense of style but then again, you can’t really go wrong with polka dots,” she replied laxly, demonstrating how “perfectly comfortable” she was with Nancy’s boyfriend.

“Tell me about it,” Nancy chuckled, “he basically uses industrial cans of hairspray to achieve that stylish height.”

Her mother nearly snorted, “I’m sure he wouldn’t want to hear you saying that.”

“No don’t worry, I remind him nearly every day what I think of his hair,” Nancy laughed along. In the process of grabbing her glass of orange juice, she noticed the time on her watch.

“Shit,” she whispered under her breath, “gotta go mom. Mrs. Thatcher hates when people are late to class.” Grabbing her books in a rush and carefully stowing away her crappy essay from the night before in a folder, she then gave her mother a side kiss and rushed out the door. Mrs. Wheeler waved her off, telling her to have a good day, only to quickly scurry to the window once Nancy walked out to make sure she went in the right direction of her High School.

Nancy loved driving. Even more than just driving, she liked listening to music as she did. The fact that her drive to school was always short, it meant that she only had enough time for one or maybe two songs at most. Turning on the stereo, she listened to the soft melody and lyrics while leaning back in the driver’s seat.

Every breath you take and every move you make

As she approached her school, she knew that she’d be passing Barb’s canary yellow house on her left. Even from her peripheral vision, it was impossible to ignore the ridiculous color that stood out amongst the monochromatic colors of her neighbors.

Every bond you break, every step you take, I’ll be watching you

She abruptly shut the stereo off, deciding that she just wasn’t in the mood to listen to anything at all. Fortunately for her, there wasn’t a reason to sit in silence either because a couple of seconds later, she

was pulling into Hawkins High School's parking lot. Carefully parking the car, Nancy repeated the step-by-step method to herself like any amateur driver would. Just as she perfectly took a horizontal spot, footsteps could be heard near the driver's window.

"Hey!" a notably high pitched voice nearly squealed into her car window. It was Marisol, her new lab partner from Environmental Science.

Nancy took a deep breath before getting out of the car and grinning at her, "Hey Marisol, what's up?" Standing up, Nancy was a head taller than the raven haired girl eagerly bouncing on her tiptoes in front of her.

"Oh you know, nothing really. Just trying to function on my fucked up sleep cycle" Marisol replied. Upon further inspection, Nancy noticed that the oversized hoodie and sweats she was wearing were most likely her pajamas from the night before. "Yeah, going to bed at 3am for a week straight can be really damaging 'cause like, I'm basically nocturnal now."

Nancy laughed, "Yeah, don't worry I can relate." Together they walked towards the main entrance, chatting away about how they'd spent the holidays. Marisol told her about her midnight rendezvous with this guy Brian that she claimed she had no real feelings for but Nancy knew that farce all too well. Just as they were approaching the heavy oak doors that lead to the Science hallway, a boy was on his way out.

"Oh, hi Jonathan!" Nancy said, slightly startled. He'd seemed distracted upon opening the door and if he hadn't glanced up from the ground he would've probably crashed into both of them.

He muttered an apology before smiling, "Hey, Nancy." His dark brown eyes were emphasized by the subtle ring under them, making her figure that he hadn't quite caught up on his sleeping schedule either. There was a silence for a couple of moments in which she noticed his new camera clutched in his hand.

"Well aren't you going to introduce me?" Marisol asked almost defensively, disrupting the silence that had fallen. Before Nancy

could take the initiative to introduce her friend however, Marisol waved her off. "I'm Marisol," she smiled sweetly with lips tinted with bright pink lipstick. "But you can call me Marie if you want." She extend her hand towards Jonathan expecting him to shake it with his camera-less hand.

"Oh, nice to meet you." Despite speaking to Marisol, his focus was definitely not on her as he glanced at Nancy. Regardless of whether he was actually concerned about it, he added, "You know, I haven't really seen you before. Are you new?"

"I didn't know people called you Marie," Nancy interrupted before she could answer.

Again Marisol waved her off, "Only some people can." It was becoming evident to Nancy that although she didn't know Marisol (or Marie, whatever) that well and for that long, she was a huge flirt. Not that it necessarily bothered her or anything, she could flirt with whoever she wanted to, but not when senseless talk was going to make her late for class on the first day back from break.

Taking hold of Marisol's shoulder and using her other arm to open the door, she said, "We should go. Mrs. Thatcher can be a real pain in the ass." Marisol resisted a bit, but she eventually rolled her eyes and began following Nancy.

"Yeah, I should go too. I just had to pick up something from my car that I forgot," Jonathan pointed to his car across the parking lot. Nancy wondered whether he still kept the "monster hunting" gear in the trunk. "See you around Nancy," he paused awkwardly, "and uh-Mary"

"Nice camera by the way. What model is-" Marisol tried to continue but Nancy already shut the door.

Once they were indoors and making their way to class, Marisol whispered as if he was still in front of them instead of outside in the parking lot, "Jonathan seems a little strange, doesn't he?"

Instead of immediately replying, Nancy continued to pull on Marisol's sweatshirt/pajama until they were finally in Mrs. Thatcher's

classroom and no longer under the threat of tardiness. Most of their classmates were already seated, but a couple of stragglers were arriving around the same time they did. "Yeah, I mean. He can be a little awkward around new people but that's normal."

Marisol began playing with the tips of her hair while they sat shoulder to shoulder at their lab bench, "He's kind of cute though. Ya know, in the dark and mysterious way."

Fiddling with her array of high lighters and pencils, Nancy shrugged.

"I shouldn't even try." Nancy heard her mutter to herself. Before she could ask her exactly what Marisol meant with that statement, Mrs. Thatcher stomped into the room, a box of safety goggles in tow.

"Don't get excited about these, fellas. We're not doing anything involving chemicals today," she said, making a point of stuffing the box under her desk.

Nancy sighed. Even though she doubled on science classes and was able to do all kind of interesting experiments in Chemistry class, she still wasn't looking forward to another one of Mrs. Thatcher's bland assignments.

Said teacher began tying her long gray hair into a bun while she continued, "As a way to bring in the new year, I'm assigning a project for all of you."

One would have had to been deaf, not to have heard the overwhelming series of groans that came from her students. Her projects usually involved a lot of busy work that ultimately resulted in some twisted way to get them outside and "interested in the world around them."

"Oh come now. That is no way to start 1984." Her statement had no affect on the frowns she was faced with, "Well anyways, I want you guys to do a study on the different vegetation and plants in our area."

Nancy had to stop herself from blurting something about the fact that it was the middle of winter and most of said vegetation were dead. Fortunately, Marisol beat her to it.

"Mrs. Thatcher," she didn't wait for an approval to continue, "aren't most of the plants, you know, not alive?" A couple of their classmates nodded in agreement while some like Greg from the baseball team said something along the lines of, "damn straight."

The lady must have drank an entire of gallon of expresso that morning because not even that question could bring her down. "Marisol sweetie, that's what makes the project even better. You guys will have to go to the park or the forest and find the ones that can survive in this climate."

Marisol chewed her gum loudly and whispered to her deskmate, "Yeah well no use doing the project if I freeze my ass off while I'm out there studying pine cones."

Mrs. Thatcher was relentless. "You'll be working in your lab partnerships to collect data. Those of you who are artistic can draw them or take pictures or discuss different methods with me. Remember, this project is meant to be fun and get you back into the scholarly spirit."

After going over some of the details of the project, she let them discuss what they planned to do with their partners.

"So, what do you wanna do?" Marisol asked, "Actually, I was thinking. She mentioned we could use pictures as part of the data or whatever?"

Nancy nodded, "Yeah, or we could draw them. I actually find it really relaxing to draw pla-"

"Is your friend from this morning any good at developing pictures?"

3. *Parthenocissus quinquefolia*

January 4th, 1984

Marisol would seriously just not let it go. In fact, Nancy had never seen her lab partner so eager to start a science project, let alone discuss anything remotely related to academics outside of class. Apparently, she even found it necessary to call the Wheeler residence and drag it out for even longer that evening.

“Look, I just don’t see why it’s necessary. Not to mention that the project was assigned yesterday and we have nearly a month to do it.” Nancy whispered into the phone, hoping no one else in the house would be woken by their incessant bickering.

It was almost like Marisol’s frown could be heard without being seen, “Why are you so against it? He seems like a good photographer so why not just ask him to help us take pictures.”

Nancy was reaching the point of exasperation, “We don’t even have to take pictures. Mrs. Thatcher said we could draw if we want-”

“-I’ve seen your doodles in your notebook, Nance. They’re not that great.”

She nearly felt like she needed to take a step back and defend herself but instead she continued trying to reason with Marisol, “Why don’t we take the pictures ourselves. My dad has a pretty good cam-.”

“For one thing, I suck with any sort of tech stuff and I just so happen to find a way to always ruin the film on cameras.” Nancy rolled her eyes as far back as they could go, “Secondly, you’re not that great of a photographer either. I mean, you got kicked out of yearbook club over those pictures from the football game that were mostly blurry. Plus, I think you had your finger over the lense on at least half of them.”

As this became more and more of a topic of interest, Nancy’s determination began to wane. It really wasn’t a big deal and he would probably say yes. But in the spirit of establishing herself as the

overlord of stubbornness, she countered, “I doubt Mrs. Thatcher’s picky and just because we’re partners, doesn’t mean you can put down every one of my ideas. It’s all about compromise and cooperation.”

“Are you really quoting Mrs. Thatcher right now?” Marisol’s relatively high voice seemed to reach another octave, bordering on shrilly. It was 11pm at night. Nancy did not have the heart nor motivation to continue with this petty bullshit.

“You know what, fine! We’ll do your stupid scrapbook idea and I’ll ask Jonathan tomorrow during lunch whether he’d be okay with it.” Before Marisol could interrupt her with unnecessary boasting, she stated firmly, “That doesn’t mean you’re not going to still work on the project. Gather some information beforehand at the library and have it ready by this Friday.”

“Sounds great.”

It was difficult to ignore the hint of triumph in her response, but Nancy didn’t consider the issue anywhere near over, “Goodnight, Marisol. See you tomorrow.”

She slammed the phone on the receiver, forgetting that it would possibly wake up her sister Holly across the hall. In her defense, her day had been a little more hectic than she would have liked. Having not been completely in the mood to do anything yesterday, Steve had been pretty insistent they spend some time together earlier that afternoon. Luckily for her, Tommy and Carol weren’t there to sour the mood with their unceasing and audible makeout sessions that took the slang term of “sucking face” to a literal level.

In fact, it was pretty romantic because he took her to the place they first met. Sure, she’d passed him in the halls between classes a couple of times before then, assessing his height and build with curious interest, but they’d yet to have an actual conversation before that day. She called it their introduction, while he fondly categorized it as their first fight.

It was at Farrell’s Ice Cream parlor on Wiggins Street, between the local diner and fire station. She’d ordered her regular strawberry

shortcake milkshake while he came in a couple of minutes later, coincidentally ordering the same thing. When the waitress came out from the kitchen with the drink, she dropped it off at Steve's table first instead of Nancy's. In retrospect, the waitress probably just forgot who ordered first considering it wasn't that big of a deal.

Unfortunately for Steve, Nancy had spent that entire day studying for the Chemistry benchmark and having not eaten at all since breakfast made her feel something she liked to call "hangry." Consumed by chagrin, she'd stomped over to his table, basically demanding him to give her the shake. Of course, she forgot to explain the part where she ordered first.

She chuckled at the memory of his perplexed face, utterly unable to comprehend why this strange girl was cornering him over a drink. The rest was history. Well, not all of it was completely forgotten. There was the whole part where she purposefully snatched and spilled the shake on Steve's head when he initially refused, threatened him, and then was consequently banned from Farrell's for a month. Barb was furious that Nancy had temporarily lost them a place at their regular hangout spot. *Barb.*

Nancy's previous smile was erased as she pensively stared into nothingness. She'd had a fun time earlier that day and she almost wanted to kick herself for forgetting about her best friend. It didn't seem fair that she got to spend time nuzzled up warmly to her boyfriend as he ran his fingers through her hair while Barb's body was alone somewhere, cold, indescribably cold.

"Steve!" Nancy scolded, pushing his hand away from her knee. "I'm trying to do some research!" Although her tone was urgent, it did not exceed a whisper. She would have been mortified if anyone knew her boyfriend was trying to feel her up in the middle of the library. That kind of talk could potentially get back to her mom in this godforsaken small town.

"Chill out, Nance," he murmured against her neck, his hot breath causing a sharp shiver to go down her spine. Although they were sitting in separate chairs, he was leaning in so close that he was

basically taking up her seat, pressing himself up against her side.

His cologne was suffocating, his caresses too assured. Lately, the affection that she used to welcome was starting to make her feel confined and small. Nancy reckoned Steve was sure he had her in the palm of his hand, when truly, she was barely hanging from his fingertips.

Staring at the tower of books in front of her, she decided not to think about her last assessment. Nancy was just tired. Of what? She wasn't entirely sure, but she hoped it only had to do with sleep and school.

"Let's go to lunch," he suggested in a soft voice, finally acknowledging her lack of responsiveness. "We can go to my car instead. Y'know, if you don't really wanna be around other people." She noticed that his brown eyes reminded her of coffee beans.

Clearing her throat, she smiled, "No, it's okay. I have some research to do and some other things." He looked at her mouth suspiciously, not like he usually did before he kissed her, but with uncertainty.

"Sure, okay. That's fine," he didn't question her about the further, "I'll see you after school then? You need a ride?"

She kissed his mouth quickly, hoping it would erase the hard line it had become, "No but I'll still see you." After watching him go, she looked at her watch. If she researched a couple of plants for the next fifteen minutes, that would leave 45 minutes to look for Jonathan. Having become aware of his presence a couple of months before, it was fairly difficult to pinpoint exactly where he'd be at lunch. There was a good chance he was in his car listening to music as she'd seen him do a couple of times, or outside on the school lawn, or in the darkroom, most likely by himself.

The first plant in the botanical encyclopedia was called a Virginia Creeper. It said that they resembled shrubbery but during the winter time lost most of their leaves however, not all of their blue pea-sized berries. The picture offered resembled something she'd seen near a statue at the park. Her presumption was proved correct as she read the plant had a tendency of wrapping itself around structures.

After another 10 minutes of skimming through various encyclopedias and textbooks, Nancy decided it was around time to ask Jonathan whether he'd help them out. Carefully putting the books in their correct spots and making sure she didn't leave anything behind, she started making her way towards the library exit. As she walked down the hallway, her head turned to survey the visible lawn on the other side. It was a particularly cold day, so the likelihood of him being there was fairly low. However, after a couple of seconds of inspection, she noticed a hooded figure leaning up against the wall outside the gym. His face wasn't visible but the camera hanging around his neck was a dead give away.

Debating whether she should go back to her locker and pick up her jacket, she ultimately decided her lilac sweatshirt was enough. Besides, there were a pair of mittens in her bag that she could pull out if need be. As she opened the door, the cold air bit at her nostrils and faintly dried her eyes. Traversing a bit of the parking lot, she finally reached him but he didn't notice just yet. His hooded head was looking downwards while his left hand seemed to be at his mouth.

"Hey, what's up?" she asked tentatively. His head shot up, quickly throwing and stomping on the object he'd been holding to his mouth on the floor. Realizing it was only Nancy, he calmed down a little but with a tenseness in his shoulders.

"Was that a cigarette?" she asked, almost tempted to smirk a bit. It wasn't like most of their classmates hadn't at least smoked one cigarette. Even she had once, on the last day of her sophomore year under the bleachers. One of the old girls in her gym class had brought a pack to share. The taste was horrible, disgusting even, but it was more about experiencing something different with her classmates that had made it memorable.

"Uh, no," he answered briskly, obviously not wanting to go into further explanation.

Before he could stop her obstinate curiosity, however, she kicked his foot aside revealing a thinly wrapped funnel shaped paper. "Really? On school property?" Her voice gave away she was pretty baffled. A cigarette could easily be let slide by a teacher, but a blunt required a

little more paperwork.

Not breaking eye contact, Jonathan sighed, "I know, it's stupid." He seemed significantly downtrodden, at least more so than when she'd seen him two days prior. Her tone didn't seem to make him feel any better either. His eyes were ringed and the slight color that covered his cheeks seemed to be only a product of the biting cold. "I thought it would help me relax. I've been a bit on edge."

She stuffed her hands into her pockets, the cold air already numbing her fingers and knuckles, "How so?"

"Don't worry about it," he said weakly, toying with a loose strand on the end of his sweater. Nancy knew it was better to let him share what whatever was happening on his own terms. It wasn't necessarily that he wasn't easy to budge, but she could tell that he resented the type of people that would force him to open up. "What are you doing out here anyways?" he shivered slightly, not comprehending why she'd voluntarily submit herself to the climate.

"Uh, yeah," she thoughtlessly scratched the back of her neck. It was kind of shitty of her to have responded with judgement when she was the one who needed a favor. "You know that girl you met yesterday," she started, "Marisol?"

He looked at her curiously at first, but then his eyes brightened in recognition, "You mean Mary...or Marie? I forgot her nickname."

"Just call her Marisol," Nancy stated bluntly.

"I remember," he started shifting his weight on his feet, "What about her?"

"Well, she's my partner for environmental science," her preamble did seem to be making any connections in his mind and he was probably wondering why she was even talking to him about it. "And we were wondering if you wanted to help us with a project."

"Not really the science type. I mean, not that I don't want to help," he corrected himself, "but I don't think I can be helpful."

"No, I know," she paused and then backtracked, "Not that I didn't

think you'd be good at science or -whatever- anyways. It has to do more with photography actually."

Jonathan raised his eyebrows, instinctively wrapping his hand around the camera resting against his navel. "That seems a little bit more my speed."

She laughed warmly, "Yeah, don't get your hopes up too high. It's pictures of plants, dead ones mostly." Giving in to the chill, she finally pulled out her ridiculous purple mittens from her bag. To hell with whether they looked childish, she'd rather keep her fingers. "Neither of us are good with cameras and have utterly no knowledge about blackroom procedures."

Nodding his head and eyeing the mittens, he seemed to be considering it. "It's darkroom actually," he corrected her with a slight curl on the edge of his lips, "but sure, no problem." He leaned up against the wall behind him, causing her to take a step further. The offensive substance lay forgotten between their feet.

"This weekend? Marisol and I could meet at the park?" If this went according to plan, she could be done with the project two weeks before the due date. That would mean two less weeks of discussing school work with Marisol. Her partner wasn't a horrible person, she was just a horrible person when it came to projects.

Jonathan looked as though he was intensely wracking his brain, "You'll have to make an appointment with my manager, but I'm sure I could squeeze you guys in." Surprised yet amused, she shoved him on the shoulder. "Kidding. Kidding," he laughed softly. It wasn't a sound she heard often, not being able to help joining in with a chuckle.

Extending her mittened hand, she stated, "So, it's a deal?"

Hesitantly at first, he reached out for her hand. Despite the mittens, she could feel the warmth of his palm radiate onto her own, surprised they contrasted so starkly with the temperature of her own. "Deal," he breathed, his voice cracking a little, most likely accost of the dry chill. After a couple of seconds, Nancy was the first to pull her hand back as he followed suit almost immediately. *almost*.

"I guess I should go back inside," she said, rubbing her hands together to create friction and silently cursing Indiana weather, "Wouldn't want to get detention with Mr. Caster."

"The pervert with the socks that never match?" he asked, not budging from his spot against the wall. It was evident he wasn't ready to go back into school yet.

"That's the one," she turned to reply, while walking back towards the school entrance in long strides.

After a couple of yards of distance, he added loud enough to hear from half way across the lot, "Nice mittens by the way."

She smiled back, mirroring his own.

4. Sorry Not Sorry

Notes for the Chapter:

This is a long one to make up for the time it took me to update lol

January 7, 1984

It was Friday and Nancy could sense it without having to double check her calendar. Maybe it was the thin blanket of repose that seemed wrap itself around her, or the warm pungent smell of her mother's prized meatloaf emanating from the kitchen. Something about Friday evenings in the wintertime made them her favorite time of the week.

While she sat in a comfortable spot on the couch, she could hear clamorous bustling from below in the basement. Mike had invited his friends over for what seemed to be endless rounds of Dungeons and Dragons and they didn't seem to be stopping anytime soon. Despite the array of horrors they'd witnessed a couple of months prior, the boys still seemed to maintain a level of innocence that Nancy found both refreshing and soothing.

Before, their perpetual playfulness used to annoy her a lot, and they'd learned not to ask her to join in anymore after multiple door slams in their face and assertions like, "I have better things to do." However, not that Nancy would admit it to anyone else, she sometimes wished they'd come upstairs and ask her to play as a sorcerer or even a druid if she was lucky.

The commercials between *Wheel of Fortune* started and she decided to take advantage of the break to go to the bathroom. As she was turning the corner down the hall, she nearly bumped into another body. The young boy, as it turned out to be, let out a yelp that was recognized as Will's. Looking down on him, she noticed his eyes were wide and he had a ghost of scared expression on his face.

She laughed softly, resting her hand on his head, "Oh, sorry there. Didn't mean to scare you." Instead of laughing along with her as she

expected him to, he simply gulped, masking the previous concern to an obviously strained smile.

Clearing his throat, he assured her, "Don't worry about it." Before she could ask if he was feeling alright, based on the slight green tint on cheekbones along with his slight shivering, he quickly stepped past her into the bathroom and slammed the door behind him. Part of her wanted to walk away and pretend everything was fine. That she had nothing to be afraid of anymore. That it was over - all of it. However, her feet wouldn't move from their spot on the carpet.

Instead, she felt herself leaning her head towards the bathroom door, resting her ear along the thin crack. At first, she couldn't hear anything other than her blood pumping near her ears and her own steady breathing but after a couple of seconds, she caught a different sound. Most likely muffled by a towel or something, but Nancy could hear strangled choking. Then, as soon as she heard it, it was over. The curious sounds were followed by running sink water and then small steps towards the door. Realizing he was going out again, Nancy ripped her face away from the door and hastily half-jogged back to the living room.

Something was definitely wrong. Her mind flashbaced to Jonathan and the way he'd been acting and wondered whether this had anything to do with it. Sure, Will had been a little strange after everything. His voice was softer, he wasn't as energetic, but Nancy had never taken into consideration whether there could have been other side effects. The kid almost died for christ sake. Her heart pounded against her chest and she willed her breathing to regulate while she heard Will's footsteps retreat back into the basement.

Maybe she was overreacting. That was always a possibility in these sort of situations, especially when she was still a bit edgy. But facing that monster that still plagued her nightmares had made her realize that anything is possible, no matter how sick and fucked up. It was no use trying to force Will to say whether anything was going on and it definitely wouldn't happen overnight. Regardless, she was going to find out what the hell was going on, at whatever pace needed.

"Nancy!" her mother called from the kitchen, "Could you go tell the boys dinner starts in 15 minutes?"

She jumped when her name was called, much like Will did when they nearly crashed into each other. Getting her wits together, she replied, "Sure, just a sec."

"Get your father too. I think he's in his office," Mrs. Wheeler added, beginning to set up the table in the dining room.

Scolding herself to stop fidgeting with her hair, she walked to her father's office which was farther down the hall than the bathroom. She knocked quietly, awaiting Ted Wheeler's permission to enter. The gesture was mostly a convention. When Nancy was a kid, younger than Mike but a little older than Holly, she'd come into her father's office and begun playing with the office tools. Stacking paperwork and using a stapler made her feel like a big kid but it didn't compare to when she figured out to use the shredder propped against the side of the desk. She ended up shredding important paperwork and from then on she always had to ask for permission to go in. Not that the rule was necessarily enforced anymore, but like she'd figured before, it was out of habit.

"Come in," a gruff voice said.

Opening the door and peeking her head in, she said, "Mom says dinner's almost ready." Her father was sitting in his desk, the same one she'd made a mess of years ago. His hair was a little more disheveled than usual and judging by the clutter of his desk, he was pretty swamped in work.

He rubbed his eyes, maybe somehow trying the smudge the tiredness out of them, "I'll be out soon."

Nancy nodded and gently shut the door again. That was mostly what their relationship was like; a couple of exchanged phrases every couple of days to remind each other of their individual existence. With that over with, she then quickened her pace to visit the basement. Instead of calling from the top of the stairs like she usually did, she decided to see what they were up to.

The four of them were surrounding a circular table in the center of the room, directing their attention to a small board game in front of them. From the looks of his wide smile, Mike seemed to be winning

while judging from the frown on Dustin's face, he wasn't doing as well. The boys bickered passionately over pawns between taking handfuls of potato chips from the bowl Mrs. Wheeler usually left out for them. Focusing on Will located at his usual spot, she noticed he was acting pretty normal, making her doubt whether there had been anything wrong in the first place.

They hadn't seem to notice their entrance, so their heads shot up when she said, "Dinner time in 15 minutes."

At first, Lucas' facial expression gave away that he was surprised she'd even come down there, but he quickly changed it to a smile. "Hi, Nancy. How you been?" He asked, displaying an even set of white teeth. Dustin followed suit with a similar greeting while Will simply nodded at her. Meanwhile Mike seemed annoyed that they'd stopped playing.

"I've been really great," she fibbed, apprehensively straightening the pale pink blouse she was wearing. "What about you guys?" She asked, looking directly at Will.

"Pretty good," Dustin started, "Mr. Clarke got a new radio to replace the broken one, you know," he paused, trying to think of the correct words to use, "after it exploded."

"We actually reached some truck driver frequencies in Australia. It was awesome, mate," Lucas imitated a strong accent that in no way whatsoever resembled an Australian one.

The boys burst into laughter at Lucas' attempt and then tried to replicate their own take on the accent. Noting that they seemed to be engrossed in their own conversation, she backed away onto the staircase. Mike's laugh stood out in the small chaos and it made Nancy thankful he had friends that made him feel that way. With a final glance in their direction, she climbed the stairs to help her mother set up for dinner.

After dinner, Nancy excused herself to her bedroom. Despite enjoying having a lot of warm conversation, she felt drained and desired to be

alone in the silence of her bedroom. Picking up her class book from her backpack, she began to read and get ahead on the weekend's homework. Upon reaching her second assigned chapter, the phone on her nightstand began to ring.

Shit. She'd completely forgotten she was supposed to call Steve that evening. Apparently he'd made some plans for them to go out. Sitting up, she grabbed for the phone and put it to her ear.

"Nance! How goes it, baby." He was speaking a bit louder than necessary and there was a slight slur that strung his words together. She recognized the tone and realized that he had probably been drinking and not alone, judging by the myriad of voices in the background.

She struggled to stop herself from groaning, "Steve, what are you up to?" Her fingers played with the coil of the telephone line. It wasn't that she necessarily had a problem with him drinking, he just had the tendency of being a little obnoxious when he did.

"So get this," he starts, "Me and a couple of friends are at the bowling alley near Hightstown, you know the one." She didn't know which one he was talking about but she definitely knew Hightstown was more than half an hour away.

"Sure," she lied.

"Well, I was expecting you to call earlier so I figured you were a lil' busy so me an' Tommy drove here to some party," he hushed the people who were talking around him, "and uh- I was wondering if you wanted to come?"

Nancy began debating whether she was even in the mood, "Steve-"

"-We're all going to the water tower in like an hour and it's going to be so awesome. I heard you can even see all of Hawkins from the top."

"I'm not," she hated herself for seeming like such a downer, "I don't really think I'm up to it."

He didn't answer at first, but he seemed surprised, "C'mon baby, it's

Friday! There's no homework you'll have to worry your pretty little head over and you could get away with getting back before the 'rents notice."

"It'll take me at least 45 minutes to get there and I just, I don't know-

"-We had so much fun the other day at the parlor. The one where we met, c'mon, I feel like I barely see you." When she didn't reply immediately he added in that voice he likes to use when he wants something, "I miss you."

"I've been really tired this week, okay. Today just isn't good." She could hear voices telling him to hurry up. The thought that he was probably having this conversation at some public phone irked her.

He huffed audibly into the phone, "What about tomorrow?"

"Project," she stated guiltily. It was better not to go into detail, especially because those plans involved Jonathan. Their dislike for each other simmered down considerably after the whole ordeal at Jonathan's house and then Christmas, however, Steve was still wary of him. Wary enough to be understandably irritated if she ditched hanging out with him for Jonathan.

"Sunday, then," he said as if it was a given.

She tentatively picked at the loose strands on her pillowcase, "It's probably going to be an entire weekend thing."

"Well then why the hell not today?" His voice was raised, emphasizing his lack of ability to enunciate perfectly, "Do you even wan' to see me, is that it?"

I think I do... she thought to herself, but his tone made different words come out of her mouth. "Look, I'm not really enticed by the thought of being surrounded by drunk people."

"Oh, so it's my friends that bother you?" Nancy could already imagine him getting noticed by whoever else what as a party. They were probably going to pin her as the bitchy girlfriend that got annoyed if her boyfriend had fun without her.

"They're not your friends, you barely know them." Her voice started getting louder, reflecting his.

"How would you know? It's not like you've been up for meeting them at parties recently." Nancy wanted to scream that it wasn't her fault she didn't find the same things that fun anymore but he interrupted her. However, his voice was considerably softer, "Look, I don't care whether it's at a party or at school, I just wanna spend time with you. Be with you. You're my best friend-" he stopped himself, "girlfriend."

Nancy didn't know what to say. Instead, she said something she hadn't dared to even think until then, "I'm not the same girl you met at that ice cream parlour, okay?"

"Yeah, well I'm not entirely ignorant to what happened during that," he took a breath, "time, okay?" he mimicked her, "I saw what you saw too. I think this is more than not wanting to go to parties, Nancy."

"Steve, of course it doesn't. My feelings for you haven't changed, it's just-" there wasn't a way to put what she felt into words.

"I miss the old Nancy," he said lowly, as if he hadn't intended for her to hear. He continued purposefully louder, "I won't keep you from whatever you have to do tonight any longer. I'll call you tomorrow."

"Take care!" she added quickly, but she wasn't sure if he'd hung up before he'd heard her.

I miss her too.

Her head flopped against her pillow and she used a teddy bear to muffle her loud groan. Thoughts swam around in her head and she couldn't figure out what to make of any of them. Before she could even attempt to, there were loud steps from downstairs. It seemed it was about the time the boys usually went home.

In an attempt to distract herself a little, she decided to go downstairs to say goodbye, knowing they would probably think she'd been abducted by aliens and cloned. However, when she reached the bottom of the stairs, only Will was left at the door standing along

with Mike.

“Will, you going home soon,” she asked? Their faces said, “ *what’s it to you?*”

He looked at her brother with a knowing glance before responding, “Yeah, but maybe in a half an hour or so. My mom took a later shift at work so she might not be able to pick me up yet” he then added awkwardly, “and she doesn’t like me biking in the dark so...”

“That makes sense,” Nancy nodded so he didn’t feel the need to divulge any further. The three stood silently by the front door. Figuring that it seemed like the right thing to do, she said, “I can drive you home if you want. I need to talk to your brother anyways.”

“Jonathan?” he asked, a little perplexed while Mike studied her suspiciously.

Nancy shrugged and smirked, “Well unless you have another brother I don’t know about.”

“No, yeah, Duh,” Will corrected himself with a slight blush to his cheek. Their brief interaction in the hallway completely forgotten. Nodding her head, Nancy went to grab her keys and coat hastily before walking out alongside Will. They waved goodbye to Mike before getting in the car, their breaths visible in the early January chill. It hadn’t occurred to her that the silence may be a little uncomfortable. It was rare that she was ever left alone with one of Mike’s friends.

Luckily, the Byers didn’t live too far away and the ride was over in a little over 8 minutes with some songs on the radio to detract from the silence. Will unbuckled his seatbelt as she put the car in park on reaching his driveway.

“You don’t need to walk me to the door,” Will declared a little embarrassed when he noticed her undoing her seatbelt as well.

Nancy laughed at his insinuation. She remembered being his age and growing out of the desire to be treated like a child. “I have to talk to your brother, remember?”

“Oh, right,” Will blushed even deeper than before. Nancy felt a flood of affection fill her chest, only making her dread the idea that something was wrong even more. Together, they walked to the front door as Will fished his pockets for the house keys.

“Jonathan!” he called, dropping his backpack and striding towards their kitchen. At first it seemed like no one was at home but as Nancy leaned against the kitchen table, they could hear some scrambling from a bedroom down the hall.

“That you, Will?” Nancy recognized Jonathan’s distinguishable voice. However, it didn’t prepare her to see him coming out of his bedroom in just his boxers.

“Oh, shit,” he choked upon noticing Nancy before sprinting back into his bedroom, nearly tripping in hurriedness.

Nancy stifled chortles by slapping her hand up to her mouth while Will howled without restrain. “Nice one, Jonathan,” his little brother teased. She could only imagine how startled Jonathan must have been to see her in his kitchen, on top of his state of undress. It had been over a month since she’d last been standing where she was. Time had evidently passed, judging by the extensive repairs that had been done. From her spot in the kitchen, she could get a good view of the living room which nearly looked like new if it weren’t for the makeshift ouija board that was left on the wall. A reminder of it all.

“Thanks for telling me we had a guest, you ass,” Jonathan called from his bedroom, a mixture of annoyance and embarrassment in his words.

Will smiled smugly and said, “sorry, bro,” obviously not sorry in the slightest. Within the same minute, Jonathan emerged once again, this time in a tshirt and pajama pants. His eyes fell on his younger brother first as he ruffled his hair, “Hey, kiddo.” Will in turn gave him a quick hug and made his way to his own bedroom, muttering a brief goodnight to him and Nancy.

Once Will was gone and it was no longer avoidable, Jonathan finally looked up at Nancy, scratching his disheveled hair in uneasiness. “Uh- I was sleeping so, yeah, I usually sleep like that,” he stuttered.

She could tell by the scratchiness of his voice and slight droopiness of his eyelids that he was speaking the truth.

“Usually sleep like what?” she feigned innocence. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

Jonathan smiled back at her, a crooked one that only emphasized his sleepy state and made something in her chest flutter. “Thanks,” he said simply, thankful that she wasn’t going to go out of her way to fluster him. “Well, -uh, what brings you here, anyways?”

“Oh,” Nancy realized she hadn’t mentioned that part, “I came to talk about the project. Might as well do it while I drop off Will so I don’t have to call too late at night.”

“Right.” he crossed his arms. Nancy noticed that despite his lanky build, his arms were defined with a layer of subtle muscle. Before she could rest her eyes for too long, she directed her line of vision back towards his face, willing them to stay there.

“Well, Marisol and I were wondering if 11am at the park worked for you? It’s kind of early for the weekend but then we’ll finish sooner.” Nancy shifted her weight from side to side, trying to decipher the emotions on his face.

He nodded coolly, “yeah, that’s perfect. At the park, right?”

“Yup,” Nancy smiled in affirmation, glad to see that he didn’t seem displeased by the aforementioned plans. Her eyes focused on the clock hanging on the wall behind his head, and she sighed, “I should get going. It’s late.” She could already envision her mother pacing the kitchen, wondering why she was taking so long.

“Oh, sure,” he seemed a little disappointed. It was probably the fact that he’d been forced to get out of bed for such a curt and superfluous conversation. He slowly walked her to the door, making sure he maintained a considerable distance between them.

“Goodnight, Jonathan,” she said quietly, “sorry, for coming unannounced and everything.”

“Don’t mention it,” he paused, “Like, I mean it. Let’s pretend it never

happened.” A light danced behind his eyes as he made his lighthearted comment. “But thanks for giving Will a ride. I didn’t say it earlier.”

“Not a problem. Have a good night,” she said with finality, beginning her short walk to the car. He watched her get in, wary of the darkness that encircled her.

5. Ice Cold

Notes for the Chapter:

Thanks so much for all the positive feedback despite being super delayed at updating. I really didn't expect this great of a response and it means so much!!!

P.S. I was checking out the dates for the time frame and realized that I sort of miscalculated, so it's a little off (just one day) in case anybody takes the time to inspect it. My mistake.

January 8, 1984

Nancy stood outside of Steve's backyard. This time at night instead of broad daylight. The cold air chilled her, making her heart feel as though it were a heavy chunk of ice resting static in her rib cage instead of its natural pulsing state. Her freezing breath came out in rapid exhalations, evidently causing the cloud of gray vapor that obscured her vision. Cautiously turning her back, she desperately searched for any sign of movement or light from Steve's house, but there wasn't any. It didn't take her long to realize that aside from being completely in the dark, she was alone.

The mere thought had her running towards the driveway, forcing her to cut through the entire expanse of the Harrington's yard. She tried not to look to her right but inevitably, her footsteps slowed while passing the pool. The water was crystal clear, the sort of blue that you'd expect on a tropical island shore. Definitely not during the winter in Indiana's deciduous forests. In addition to its unusual coloring, the pool was the only source of light in what seemed to be a mile radius, heavily contrasting with the darkness that seemed to want to swallow her whole. Its luminescent glow captivated Nancy, forcing her feet to remain grounded despite her growing feeling of dread.

The longer she looked into its depths, studying the subtle ripples caused by the cool gusts of wind, the closer she felt herself getting to it. Her breath hitched when she saw bubble forming on its surface. Instead of being clear and glassy, they were blood red and expanding as if they were simmering

in a boil. As they erupted, the mass of bubbles created a crescendo of sounds similar to lava forming.

Nancy cursed inwardly only because her tongue was caught in the back of her throat, useless in sight of what she was witnessing. To her horror, she watched motionless as something began to surface among the sickening scarlet globules. At first it was only a finger, then two, and before she could turn and sprint away, and entire hand was emerging from the pool, fingers curled as though whatever it was connected to was in great pain.

The hair on the back of her neck stood on end when she recognized the ring wrapped around the hand's middle finger. Undoubtedly, the silver band inscribed with the word 'fortuna' on it was the ring Barb had gotten upon graduating the 8th grade. It was a moment in which Nancy wanted to scream, cry, sprint away, and collapse at the same time. Before logic could get the best of her, she grabbed for her, hoping to somehow pull her to the surface. However, the hand wouldn't budge and only pulled Nancy's hand down towards the pool.

"Barb?" She choked in a strangled whisper, "I don't want to let you go." Hot tears spilled from her eyes, vulnerable to the force pulling her down towards the water. Before she could resist, she was falling into the depth of what obviously wasn't water, but something far worse.

"Stop!" Nancy screamed, shooting up from her bed. Tears stained her cheeks while sweat dripped down the sides of her forehead. "Oh my God," she murmured to herself repeatedly, cradling her head between her arms. Never had any of her dreams been so vivid or realistic to the point where she could still feel the pressure of Barb's...something's, fingers gripping her hands. The sweaty sheen covering the majority of her skin looked as though she'd dipped herself into a basin of water.

All the months she'd spent blocking out any thoughts, memories, observations, related to what had happened became useless from the moment she saw Will in such an odd state the day before. There was something wrong and no matter how many times she told herself that she needed to face reality, there wasn't a possibility that it was going to be accepted immediately- or at least she thought there wouldn't.

Will may have been returned, but there was no confirmation that whatever was out there, whatever door had been opened, was still a looming threat. However, she couldn't help but feel as though she had no other choice but to wait. There was yet to be concrete evidence of anything other than Will's behavior and the seed of foreboding it planted that most likely caused that horrendous nightmare.

Everyone else in Hawkins who hadn't been directly involved moved on, of course, with the exception of Barb's parents. They were still under the guise that Barb had run away, that she had purposefully left them without a trace or a note to ensure her safety and that was something Nancy was going to have to live with for the rest of her life.

Get yourself together, Nancy

Her head shot up when she heard some scuffling outside of her door. The sun was already out so she figured that it could be anyone in her house, however, she didn't expect Holly to pop her head in warily.

"Nancy," Holly started in a bird-like timbre, carefully wording the term, "Break-f-ah-st,"

Despite her innocent demeanor, Nancy could tell that Holly was concerned, whether she could even determine what that emotion was or not. It wasn't too far off to conclude that she'd heard her scream when she woke up either. It was a wonder that no one else had.

"Oh, okay. I'll be coming down soon." Nancy replied lightly, making a point of smiling despite wiping tears off her face. Holly continued to watch her from the door, somehow appearing far more mature and observant than what would be expected at her age. Tentatively at first, she began walking towards Nancy, taking small steps towards her bed. It seemed she wanted to say something but instead, she simply wrapped her little arms around her older sister, inviting her into a warm embrace. All of a sudden, Nancy felt tears welling up in her eyes once more. She wanted to somehow absorb the obliviousness and innocence that lived inside of Holly but she knew that part of herself was long gone; that Barb had taken it with her.

She gently pushed Holly away, cupping her face in a way she hadn't done since she was a newborn, "I'll be down soon, alright?" Holly nodded and promptly left her bedroom, purposefully leaving the door wide open. Taking a quick glance at the alarm clock by her bedside, she realized that she was supposed to be leaving in a little less than half an hour to pick up Marisol on the way to the park.

Cursing to herself, she jumped out of bed and began rifling through her dresser, the nightmare forgotten as a new focus occupied her mind. With some internal debate, she finally decided on wearing a simply white t-shirt, a long sleeved gray shirt, with an over-sized sweatshirt that read University of Michigan to top it all of and hopefully combat the cold. After pulling on a pair of light-washed jeans and sneakers, she observed her unkempt hair and the residue of mascara from the night before. Her chocolate brown curls which she usually brushed into a ponytail or clipped back, hung wildly past shoulders. Conscience of her limited time, she gave herself one more brooding inspection before scampering to the bathroom to brush her teeth and wash off the makeup she'd forgotten to remove overnight.

To her relief, her mother had set out some toast for her by the time she rushed downstairs.

"I have to go do a project," She blurted out between scarfing down her toast and chugging a glass of milk. Only Mrs. Wheeler and Holly were in the kitchen.

"That's fine," her mother said plainly, however, Nancy knew the statement would be followed by a myriad of questions. "With whom and when will you be back?" She continued casually while sipping her coffee.

Nancy fought the urge to roll her eyes, "My lab partner Marisol. I'll probably be back before dinner" She purposefully left out Jonathan's name knowing that it would only bring rise to more questions.

"What's the project for?" Her mother persisted, but Nancy was already picking up her bag and on the way out the backdoor.

Shrugging before making her hasty exit, she responded while still chewing the last of her toast, "Science. Bye Holly!"

Within minutes, Nancy was driving down Marisol's street, conveniently only a block or two from Hawkins Park. Marisol was already standing outside of her driveway, clad in a jean miniskirt over bright green tights. It was a wonder she hadn't already frozen to death.

"You look like crap," was Marisol's early morning salutation as she got into Nancy's heated car.

Nancy laughed, refusing to allow herself to dwell on that morning, "No, I look warm,". She knew her partner didn't mean to offend her yet sometimes she questioned whether her own patience would tolerate her lack of filter for much longer.

Marisol reapplied her signature bright pink lipstick using the wing mirror on the passenger's side. "Rough night?" she asked with a tone Nancy recognized as an implication for something else. Something that hadn't happened in a while.

With eyes focused on the road, she shrugged, "I didn't sleep well."

"Is that anyone's fault in particular?" Marisol sniggered as if she was in on a joke.

Nancy decided to choose her words carefully, "Steve and I-"

"-Hah I knew it. I'm basically a psy-"

"Aren't in a good place right now, if that's what you're implying." The fact that she was driving gave her a good excuse of avoiding the confused face that Marisol was probably giving her.

"What did he do this time. I swear, if he was being an asshole I'll call my cousin up. You know, Benny, and he'll take care of-" She blubbered before Nancy interrupted her.

"-No, Marisol. Jesus, calm down. I think it was something I did." Their conversation over the phone kept replaying in her head as she pulled into the park's parking lot. The fact that he'd probably call her at some point in the day and she wouldn't be home made her stomach churn with guilt.

"What did you do?" the raven-haired girl asked with what Nancy believed to be disbelief, "You guys are my favorite couple? If you guys don't work, no one can."

Nancy didn't know what to say, "Uh, Jonathan is going to show up here soon. He said we'd all meet in the parking lot." In order to fill the growing silence following her failed attempt of abruptly changing the subject, she added, "Well, what about you and Brian? Don't you think you guys will last?"

Marisol laughed coolly, "Brian isn't boyfriend material, believe me. It was a Christmas holiday fling."

Nancy could resist to raise her eyebrows and smirk, "That's not what I heard him telling Charlie in Math class."

"You're shitting me right. What'd he say?" Marisol asked with a dumbfounded expression, obviously trying to downplay whatever emotion she was feeling.

"Something about you guys having a real" Nancy used her hands as air quotes, "connection."

Just as Marisol's blush turned into the shade of a bright red fire hydrant and Nancy was about to tease her for it, she recognized a car pulling into the parking lot.

Marisol rotated her head to see what had taken Nancy's attention, inwardly thankful that it wasn't on her any longer. Exclaiming in recognition, "Oh, there's our little helper."

Nancy lightly shoved her shoulder, "Hey, don't call him that. It's condescending."

As they both got out of the car, Marisol questioned, "Well, what am I supposed to call him?" Instead of replying, Nancy gave her a look that expressed something along the lines of "behave." Marisol had undoubtedly been a handful as a child. Fortunately for her parents, she was also an only child.

While approaching Jonathan's car, he was stepping out of it, careful not to knock his camera against the door as he did so. He seemed far

more prepared for the elements in a thick wool lined denim jacket as opposed to Marisol's borderline springtime getup.

Once he noticed them, he gave them a small wave which Nancy mirrored. A smile ghosted his face that resembled the one he'd given her after their brief exchange at his house. He seemed far more well rested than their previous encounters and his demeanor comforted her. Before she'd gotten to know him, she would have never expected that he was capable of being a source of ease while also harboring strong feelings of rage and resentment. Seeing him maintain his calm throughout most of what they'd been through and then basically losing his shit when Steve slandered his family had been a roller coaster of revelation that made her curious for what other dimension of his personality had yet to be disclosed.

"Hey, Jonathan," Nancy said warmly despite to temperature, "I wanted to say thanks again."

He shook his head, "I like doing this."

"What? Freezing your ass off?" Marisol interjected, making them all chuckle in unison. Together they directed themselves towards the center of the park where the statue Nancy had recalled to have vines wrapped around it was. On the way, however, they took some photographs of other plants that somehow flourished during harsh winters. Even though they were only thorny shrubs or tired florets. Their resilience made up for their lack of petals, colors, or aesthetic appeal in general.

Regardless of her sagacious observation, she was slightly more fascinated by the process by which Jonathan took pictures. Once either Marisol or Nancy pointed out a plant, he'd first determine the angle of light followed by a closer inspection of what angle showcased the plant best. Unlike the awkward manner in which he usually carried himself, his movements were self assured and even confident. There were moments where it was as though he forgot they were even present.

As they walked along a particularly shrubby path, Marisol declared, "Look, some heather blossoms." The plants in question hung over an old wooden bench meant for when the climate was less unforgiving

and more inviting.

"Do you guys wanna be in the picture?" he asked, "Like, sitting on the bench. It would make a good cover photo." It was probably the first time he'd directed a full sentence towards them since entering the park. Marisol nodded vigorously in approval while Nancy wasn't quite behind the idea of keeping a picture of her current state for posterity but she figured that it wasn't worth arguing against. As she sat down on the creaky and decayed wood of the bench, she thought about what Jonathan had told her in the darkroom weeks before and how a picture could capture more than what a person can say in words. It was difficult not to wonder what her smile in a photograph said. Whether it reflected a genuine smile, a knowing grin, or if it was evident that there was a mask over gloom.

Jonathan crouched down so his camera was level with their faces and counted down from three. Just as he was about to take the photo, he paused, "Nancy, maybe you should relax your smile a little." She realized she was straining a bit and blushed.

"It's kind of frozen," she joked with an awkward chortle, putting in an effort to relax her face while Marisol rolled her eyes playfully.

Marisol covered Nancy's hand with hers, "I don't think it's just your face. You might as well be a block of ice." She seemed to be wracking her brain over something. "You know what? I think I saw your mittens in the glove compartment. I'll run over and get them to you."

In an instant, her partner was sauntering in the same direction they'd come from while Nancy felt herself feel a sense of gratitude for her incautious friend. Despite her unusual characteristics, she was sensitive underneath careless remarks and blunders. A comfortable silence filled her absence and Jonathan got up from his crouched position to sit next to her on the bench.

"You know how you got me a gift for Christmas?" he started, "and I didn't think to get you one."

Nancy nodded perplexedly, "Yeah, and then I told you not to worry about it?"

"But I worried about it anyways because I just like annoying you," Jonathan chuckled, a small dimple forming on the side of his cheek that Nancy had never taken the time to notice. "Anyways," she watched him closely as he pulled a package out of the inside pocket of his jacket and placed it in her hands. As he was passing it to her, her eyes lingered on the faint pale line that crossed his left palm. The same mark she had on her own hand.

Hesitantly, she pulled on the string of yarn that bundled the simple striped wrapping paper. "It's not anything fancy by the way," he added, "I just thought of you when I saw it."

She couldn't help but laugh when the wrapping paper was moved aside to reveal a knitted scarf the same obnoxious purple-ly color as her mittens. Instead of immediately thanking him, she remarked warmly, "and you waited until now to give it to me?"

He shrugged, playing off an air of nonchalance while impulsively stuffing his hands into his pockets, "Well, I didn't really wanna give it to you in front of Marisol because, I don't know, it's awkward."

"No, I think it's because you were scared that she'd say something like, 'where's *my* gift then, Jonny boy?'" His dark eyes trailed from her face to the ground, a hint of pink resembling the heather blossoms dusted over his cheeks. "Or is it just because she falls under the category of the majority of people you don't like?" Although she said it jokingly, there was a tone of actual question in her voice.

Evidently taken aback from her comment, Jonathan scratched the back of his neck, "That was really pretentious of me to say. I know you're joking but I don't spend my time disliking people, or I shouldn't at least."

"What made your opinion change?"

His eyes found hers again, "Remember after we were at that hardware store and you said something about how you'd never expected to be in a situation where you're hanging out with me."

"Yeah," a gust of wind blew a strand of hair over her face making her quickly swipe it behind her ear.

"I just- I don't know, how to explain it exactly but if I really had that 'I don't like most people' mindset that is purely based on first impressions, I doubt we'd have ever become friends... or that Steve and I would be okay with each other," he raised his eyebrows, "if that makes any sense."

"It does," she replied, digging her fingers between the folds of the scarf he'd gotten her. The fact that he'd opened up on that small bit of information prompted her to refrain from asking him more questions on his standpoint, knowing that that had probably been difficult enough on it's own. Instead, she wrapped his gift around her neck and asked for clarification, "So you don't hate Marisol?"

"No, just her tights," he smiled crookedly in reference to their neon material, "they're fucking blinding."

Notes for the Chapter:

Heads up that there will be far more interaction between Nancy and Jonathan following this chapter (since setting up Nancy's background has been a focus in previous updates) :)))

Author's Note:

Hope you liked it! Some feedback would be great as this is my first time posting works on AO3 :)